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**‘The Pair of Opposites Paradox’: ambivalence, destabilisation and resistance in *Five Miles From Outer Hope***

**Ginette Carpenter**

In an interview published by the *Times Literary Supplement* Nicola Barker was asked whether she preferred Tracey Emin or Jeff Koons? Her answer was Emin, claiming ‘not [to be] sure about Koons. He’s just so smooth. I celebrate the bumpy’ (Anonymous, 2017). This ‘bumpiness’ is an ingrained characteristic of Barker’s own work and, as a result, reading Barker is very often a turbulent ride. Critics have responded to Barker’s perceived lack of smoothness with a series of attributes that attach themselves uncomfortably to the woman writer. In his assessment of *Burley Cross Postbox Theft* (2010) James Lever labels Barker ‘unshuttupable’. Alex Clark’s review of *Five Miles from Outer Hope* (2000) stresses the author’s ‘determinedly perverse and ungovernable imagination’, while Geraldine Bedell’s account of the Booker-Prize nominated *Clear* (2004) highlights Barker’s ‘vision’ as ‘uncompromisingly [...] her own’. ‘Unshuttupable’, ‘ungovernable’, ‘uncompromising’: taken together, adjectives such as these inculcate stereotypical images of the hysterical woman and of the writer as veering out of control. Giles Foden’s report on the 2007 Booker Prize judging process manages only a backhanded compliment by comparing Barker to George Eliot, claiming that ‘with much more disciplined handling [*Darkmans*] could have been a *Middlemarch* for our times’ (Foden, 2007). Thus ‘undisciplined’ is added to the list. These reviewers all praise Barker’s originality and imagination but there is a critical undertow that positions her writing as misbehaving, as not adhering to the rules. I strongly suspect that were she a male writer Barker would be heralded, if not garlanded, for such

misconduct, and her style would be regarded as startling innovation rather than unruly disobedience.

Academic work on Barker to date is, perhaps unsurprisingly, more generous, but some still describe her writing as an ‘acquired taste’ with the potential to ‘charm or repel’ (Ellam, 2006 and Wright, 2013), or as ‘hamstrung by [its] self-conscious striving for effect’ (Rennison, 2005: 26). Again, it would be inaccurate to imply that these critics fail to acknowledge Barker’s talents, but there is a sense of her going too far, of transgressing the novel’s boundaries to an extent that damages the coherence of her work and, importantly, its accessibility and popularity. All these comments coalesce around an implied consensus that Barker makes too little space for the reader, that her imaginative project makes no concessions to her audience, and thus reading the work is always discombobulating and often frustrating. Yet importantly, as Peter Boxall observes in *The Value of the Novel*, ‘it is written into the genetics of the novel form that it should exceed the conventions which it enables, that it should remain in some sense unreadable’ (2015: 11). Barker herself, too, is acutely aware of such ambivalence and contradiction, asserting that the novel form embraces ‘the Pair of Opposites paradox. Things can both live and die at the same time’ (Anonymous, 2017). This chapter reads *Five Miles from Outer Hope* through Boxall’s and Barker’s paradoxical lenses to argue that the novel disrupts conventional conceptions and occupations of time, place, body and text in order to open up opportunities for remapping.

*Five Miles from Outer Hope* was published two years after *Wide Open* (1998) and two years before *Behindlings* (2002). It is a short work, coming in at under 200 pages, with a typically convoluted Barkeresque plot that involves extreme farce punctuated with moments of acute realist poignancy. The novel is narrated by Medve, a sixteen-year-old self-identified ‘giant’ (8), who spends the summer of 1981 living with her ‘half-arsed, high-strung, low-bred family’ (3-4) five miles from Outer Hope on a ‘part-island’ (11). Medve’s older brother

Barge and mother Mo are absent and only appear via Medve's unreliable reportage; her older sister Christabel – or Poodle – is also abroad for the largest part of the novel but makes an appearance in the denouement. These absences recalibrate the family dynamic to endow Medve with increased status and control ('I *rule* this damn ten-acre patch' [24]) while also highlighting her in-between location on the cusp between child and adult. The 'patch' is an old hotel in the Art Deco style whose grounds her father is tending while it is up for sale. Medve is narrating the summer of 1981 from a distance of fifteen years, and in addition to the detached archness this brings to her storytelling, the novel also includes various interruptions momentarily transporting the reader into the future to the acupuncture session she is undergoing in her actual present while spinning the tale of the summer of 1981. The story, in loose and baggy Barkeresque attire, revolves around the sudden appearance of La Roux, a South African army deserter, the son of a friend of Medve's father, which disrupts the daily routines of their already chaotic, sibling-rivalry-soaked hippy existence. (At the close of the novel it is revealed that La Roux is in fact the acupuncturist in whose clinic Medve is currently reminiscing.) The focus on a peripheral place inhabited by a cast of sympathetic grotesques who are subject to an improbable series of events, which is a characteristic trait of Barker's oeuvre as a whole, is distilled to a particularly high volume in in this novel due to its brevity. However, in dialogically representing teenage frustration and fabrication, *Five Miles from Outer Hope* also introduces a new form of narrative eccentricity, replete with an emphatic use of italics, which Victor Sage has identified as 'the future character of Barker's narration' (2012: 95).

Reading the novel through the prism of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Sage sees Medve's monologue as the point at which Barker adopts for the first time a narrative of uncontainable excess. As Sage explains, 'the discourse itself has become hyperbolic; its texture is formally grotesque' (95). Medve directly addresses the reader in

endearingly intimate and mockingly dismissive terms, thereby creating a shifting quicksand for interpretation. If the novel's interstitial spaces of time, place and body are capable of hosting paradoxes, then Barker's chosen narrative style is similarly paradoxical: it both welcomes and rejects. For example, when Poodle returns, Medve announces: 'The bitch is *back* but with an *Eton Crop* – it's a hairstyle, *stupid* – and tits like torpedoes (I know it's not a particularly *original* assessment, but under the difficult circumstance of her sudden return, how fucking *snappy* do you expect me to be?)' (170). By this stage in the novel, the reader has already become used to Medve's idiosyncratic style of self-expression and communication in a familiar refrain of shared confidences and abuse. Still, Barker's frequent breaking of the fourth wall cannot but augment the reader's sense of destabilisation by evoking the unpredictability of adolescent mood swings. It is also important to remember that Medve's way of speaking is ultimately a recollective re-enactment, rendering any acting-out of teenage melodrama in the novel a mere performance, the resumption of a voice that no longer exists despite its seeming credibility.

The novel begins with an unequivocal temporal marker, locating it 'during those boiled-dry, bile-ridden, shit-ripped, god-forsaken early-bird years of the nineteen eighties' (3). 1981 is invoked with great precision throughout by means of references to popular music stars, including Marc Almond (4), Joe Dolce (18), *Fun Boy Three* (93), as well as fashion and other cultural trends of the time: 'Can my hair sustain a wedge? Is the Findus Crispy Pancake truly a revelation in modern cuisine? Am I Hooked on Classics?' (13-14). Medve's family reside somewhat uncomfortably in the early 1980s. As the siblings teeter unsteadily on the edges of their independence, their father Big drags his children backwards by submerging them in the vestments and diet of hippydom that are becoming rapidly outdated. Medve is, in many ways, a child out of time, weighted-down by the clothes and habits of her upbringing while gesturing forward to the tank and guerrilla girls that will appear later that decade. The

period itself is depicted as poised on the brink of something new, as another liminal space that is neither 1970s economic downturn nor 1980s upswing: ‘Britain is sweetly faltering on the quiet cusp of soon-to-be full-throttle, hard-roaring, break-the-sound-barrier booming’ (59). Medve’s ability to discern this is, of course, due to her retrospective narration (‘I’m a big girl. I see things coming’ [10]) which results in a peppering of predictive passages: ‘And there will be riots in Brixton, and Royal marriages and the space shuttle Columbia [...] And somehow they’ll check-mate the Yorkshire Ripper’ (11). These prescient-seeming ruminations are accompanied by italicised intrusions from her 1996 acupuncture session (‘*Jesus Christ, my fucking ears are burning*’ [11]), effectively moving the reader back and forth, sometimes at considerable speed, between very different temporal narrative worlds. Barker exercises and stretches the novel form to maintain this dual timeframe, joyously foregrounding fiction’s potential to deliver the impossible. As a hosting strategy by the author it is discomfiting, demanding that the reader, who is already battling with the capricious, combative quality of Medve’s narration, must remain alert and engaged at all times. The temporal switchbacks also draw attention to the fact that the novel itself is millennial, incorporating the manifold tensions between the gradual advent of new digital technologies (emails are given the same status in the narrative frame as faxes and telegrams [41]) and the impending tsunami of their increasing indispensability in the mid-noughties. Thus, although *Five Miles from Outer Hope* predates the schism that Boxall identifies between ‘human’ and ‘planetary’ time (2015: 113), its emphasis on the interstitial and the paradoxical reads like a late twentieth-century lament of the imminent loss of the certainties of linear temporality by foreshadowing its coming fracturedness. This sense of discontinuity, the notorious Shakespearean time being ‘out of joint’, is echoed by the novel’s treatment of topography.

Like many of Barker’s works, *Five Miles from Outer Hope* is located in an edgeland space, in this case an island off the south coast of Devon that is joined to the mainland at low

tide. It is thus a paradoxical place, whole and incomplete, detached and conjoined. The title of the novel reinforces this sense of being somewhere and nowhere specific at the same time. In chapter six, the village of Outer Hope finds mention as just one of the many ‘distant white-daisy-headed settlements’ (51) that populate the coastline. Near the end of the novel, as Medve confronts Christabel for her presumed betrayal of La Roux, the view of the village is distinct and clear (182), the distance bridged, myopia rectified. The hotel likewise is a contradictory space, its former grandeur overwritten yet palimpsestically present, as its rooms are repurposed by the family. Hotels are always uncanny places, the same space being re-occupied repetitiously. In remodelling the hotel as a home, this uncanniness becomes intensified as the sense of home, and its attendant familiarity, is constantly overwritten and defamiliarised by the setting: the family eat their breakfast in the snooker room (24), they have lunch on the tennis course (129), and Medve sleeps in the cocktail bar (13). The attempt to transform an essentially transient space into a more permanent home echoes the ebb and flow of the landmass. Both the island/not-island and the hotel/home are paradoxical places and their fluctuations encourage a peripatetic existence that highlights the family’s internal fissures as well as their ability to embrace possibility and change. They are places of margins and gaps that offer room – and, literally, rooms – for experimentation. As spatial hosts, as places to be inhabited, the island/not-island and hotel/home are similarly contradictory, their overlapping designations offering both more and less than their traditionally delineated elements. Their very contradictions, their oxymoronic status, bestow opportunities that elude the rigidity of either/or. Interestingly, these spatial incongruities can be read as textual articulations of feminist geographer Gillian Rose’s concept of ‘paradoxical space’ (1993: 137-60), which refuses conventional distinctions between mind and body, real and metaphorical, experience and desire. Rose thinks about space in a way that disrupts and transgresses the entrenched binaries that inform conventional conceptions of geography and

her argument is that space is not necessarily rationally delineated or experienced but that it can be *about* contradiction, tension and paradox. Although Rose is writing from a very specific critical standpoint and at a very particular point in feminist criticism and theory, her imperative of imagining a paradoxical space that simultaneously embraces inside and outside, centre and margin, is a very useful lens through which to consider Barker's articulation of her 'Pair of Opposites' paradox. Nowhere, of course, are these opposites more apparent than in the adolescent body.

Medve repeatedly details and emphasises her own hugeness, referring to herself as 'anti-genetic' and 'unnatural': 'And this hugeness is not even counterbalanced by any degree of svelteness or grace. I have knees as wide as the skull of Neolithic man. [...] I am clumsy. I *lumber*. I can only buy shoes through mail order. I disorientate seagulls' (8). This recurring emphasis on Medve's size and lack of appeal ('I am a truly, irredeemably, unapologetically moo-faced, big-blotched, large-arsed, yank-my-udder Friesian (how can I deny it?)' [23]) underscores her teenage sense of enfreakment while evoking a more general adolescent uneasiness at the invasive occupation of puberty. The gawky adolescent body is overtly visible to its occupant and to others and often seen as alien, as out-of-sorts with itself. As such, it becomes a focus of simultaneous obsession and rejection; it cannot be left alone but cannot be accepted; it cannot be hidden but often cannot be clearly seen. Medve's narration of her own embodiment instantiates this tension. However, her discomfort is juxtaposed with her delight at the possibilities unleashed by her morphing body as she details her masturbatory habits, boasts about the size of her clitoris (a 'Jersey Royal' [13]) and is candid about her sexual desire. Alongside the self-deprecation emerges a celebration and indeed a voicing of female anatomy that defiantly fills the text. The bodies portrayed in this novel are unerringly grotesque: they fail (being too big, too small, too fat, or too thin) but they also produce (snot, spit, shit, semen, and *pleasure*). Thus, the inherent, potentially fruitful,



ambivalence of the temporal and geographic settings of the novel are echoed in Medve's adolescence as, 'built like a shire horse. Six foot three in my crocheted stockings' (7), she chaotically navigates the (literally) shape-shifting landscape between childhood and adulthood. Arguably, it is the very paradoxes of Medve's body, the contradictions that attend puberty and adolescence in particular, that encapsulate the female experience of embodiment and the female body in space.

The potential of the embodied space of femininity, so often disguised or obfuscated, is on full display here. There are echoes of Angela Carter's exuberant protagonist Sophie Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and even though, at sixteen, Medve necessarily lacks Fevvers' effortless spatial occupation, her grotesque narration and willingness to embrace rather than hide her burgeoning sexuality are refreshing. By contrast, the male member and male sexuality are mocked mercilessly. For example, La Roux is discovered in a wardrobe masturbating to the photograph of a dog (62), and when he attempts to seduce Medve by making her inspect his penis, she mocks it as 'so very ugly. And tiny too, *really* tiny' (79). In fact, all the men in the novel, with the exception of Feely, Medve's four-year-old brother, are portrayed as lacking in some way. Big, Medve's father, is diminutive (5). Barge is missing the tip of his tongue, sacrificed in an attempt to avenge his sister Poodle's humiliation by a lover (20), and Black Jack, the object of Medve's flirtations prior to the arrival of La Roux, has a thyroid problem (29). Barker deploys the male gaze and displays it at its most obnoxiously judgemental (as a teenage girl hypercritically objectifying herself), while at the same time powerfully inverting it to hit back at the patriarchal precept upon which it is founded. Similarly reinforcing and puncturing patriarchal prescription are La Roux's anxieties about the female genitalia of which Medve promises, deceptively, to rid him. La Roux traces his fears back to his childhood and his gynaecologist father's Christmas Day viewing of a book picturing 'chronically diseased wombs and vaginas', making it

impossible for him ‘even think about a woman’s sexual and reproductive organs without experiencing strong feelings of fear and revulsion’ (73-4). The novel’s comedic climax is reached at the end of chapter 16 when Medve bends down in front of a captive La Roux (and, unbeknown to her, also her family) to remove a large plastic centipede from her vagina. This inspired performance of the very monstrosity, dreaded by La Roux as inextricably attached to the female genitalia, is the apex of the novel’s repeated focus upon the duality of embodiment, expressing itself at once in embarrassment and pleasure.

Medve’s response to La Roux, from his initial appearance, is typically teenage as she actively resents his intrusion, yet also views him as a potential catch: their spectacular scrapping on a fishing trip is no coincidence (125). Their wrangling and battles, verbal and physical, and their gulling and double-bluffing of each other are the recognisable advance-and-retreat courtship rituals of adolescent attraction. Despite her superficial performance of loathing and ridicule Medve admits within a day of La Roux’s arrival that ‘this spotty, flimsy, mean-vowelled little man has pricked and pinched and skidaddled me’ (40). This ‘pricking’ is concurrently being rehearsed in the acupuncture session of the frame story, with the pun on needles a witty reminder of the two characters’ antipathy. It is then perhaps fitting that their animosity finds its resolve in La Roux’s eventual confession that Medve’s introducing him to the concept of the ‘girl-penis’ transformed him (188). This labelling of the clitoris by Medve (151) foregrounds the girl’s alleged symbolic lack, yet at the same time potentially recalibrates the gendered stereotypes of penetration that attach to embodied space. It also identifies Medve as her mother’s daughter (her mother being the inventor of an anal probe patented as ‘a fascinating new security device for the US prison service’ [9]). The repeated focus on abject bodily functions is an aspect of Barker’s mobilisation of the grotesque to shock and democratise; it also works to highlight the radical possibilities of the novel while at the same time foregrounding the very impossibility of this potential. As Sage observes, Barker’s

evocations of the body demonstrate a ‘traditional fearless, utopian drive’ (91), Rabelaisian-Bakhtinian in their refusal to adhere to sanctioned propriety. Yet, as Boxall recognises, ‘in making fictions, we propose bodies taking up spaces, in the full knowledge that these spaces do not exist’ (71). The comic scatology and taboo emphases of *Five Miles from Outer Hope*, which seem to root Barker’s novel’s representations so absolutely in corporeal concerns, actually and paradoxically, highlight the body’s disappearance in text. Simultaneously, they gesture towards the possibilities that attach to that erasure, including, as illustrated above, the challenge to hegemonic, patriarchal norms. Barker’s grotesque – again akin to Carter’s – operates within an astute understanding of both at once: the distinction *and* the overlap between materiality and text. This cognizance of the paradox (or indeed, the ultimate impossibility) of textual ‘embodiment’ is underscored by the slipperiness of Medve’s narrative voice.

Medve’s narration of the summer of 1981 is pointedly unreliable, told retrospectively and containing numerous hints that it is, at very least, highly embellished and blurring the distinction between actual and imagined experience. Barker’s chosen technique cleverly foregrounds the melodramatically rendered vicissitudes of teenage life but also provides a meta-commentary on the novel as medium. The fact that all is not as it may seem (as Medve admits that she has ‘a powerful teenage yen for exaggeration’ [81]) suggests that this is quite possibly a very tall tale that is based more on adolescent theory than practice. This narrative unreliability is underscored by Medve’s references to being ‘full of shit’ (23), her ‘capacious anus’ (81), her ‘*rampant*’ imagination (145) and ‘odious perfidy’ (63). Medve is reflexively aware of her own propensities for fictionalisation (‘Oh, come *on*. Don’t be taken in by my tone. Wise *up*. Tune in. It’s just basic girl-grandstanding’ [57]), and this is integral to Barker’s metafictional project. Medve’s fury at La Roux’s appearance is couched in storytelling terms, emphasising his role as narrative catalyst and the novel as imagined space:

‘He’s been here all of three hours or something and already the bastard’s appropriating. He’s re-inventing. He’s running bloody riot’ (31). This emphasis on the narrative as invention courses throughout *Five Miles from Outer Hope*, further disrupting any sense of textual cohesion already destabilised by the shifts in temporal perspective: ‘Hell’s bells. Events are certainly progressing at a fair old whack’ (66), and ‘everything else is only *filling*, so I’ll cut to the chase’ (165). In a side-swipe at the gullible reader, Medve’s four-year-old brother Feely admonishes her for ‘making too much of things [...] It’s only imaginary’ (34), yet this is counterbalanced by Feely’s own propensity to transgress the phenomenal/textual binary. Feely has been denied any further access to *Black Beauty* due to his desire to rehearse the death of Beauty’s friend Ginger whom he eventually wants to ‘inhabit’ (45). Medve also often finds him in the mornings ‘propped up on his pillows, eyes closed, mouth agape, in a perfect physical recreation of Jacques-Louis David’s wonderful painting, *The Assassination of Marat*’ (47). Feely’s concurrent recognition and refusal of representational practices as constructs foregrounds Barker’s witty upending of the suspension of disbelief. Feely’s ability to be moved by representation as much as (if not more than) by material experience resonates with what Boxall identifies as ‘the particular gift of the novel to our generation [which is] to live in the world without being of it’ (91).

This sense of the ambivalent and contradictory qualities of fiction characterises *Five Miles from Outer Hope* as well as Barker’s oeuvre more widely. In his critique of the novel, Nick Rennison argues that Barker fails ‘to marry self-conscious verbal gymnastics and oddball characterisation to an engaging narrative’ and that ‘the eccentricities appear forced additions’ providing ‘a checklist of weirdnesses’ that undermine the storytelling (2005: 25). What Rennison overlooks is that these ‘eccentricities’ work to emphasise the fictionality of the medium by interrupting the reader’s suspension of disbelief to highlight the imaginative practice that is being enacted; in other words, they defamiliarise. Barker has been adamant

that she does not create 'space' for the reader but rather 'create[s] an entire' and 'closed' 'world' in her works (Clark, 2017). Foden has remarked of *Darkmans* that 'not enough thought had been given to the reader. It seemed a book written for the author' (2007), quite as if this solipsism were ever entirely divorceable from any writing project. Yet Barker's lack of concession to her readers' comfort, her *dis*-easing of them, demands recognition of the effort and affect of reading. It does seem a tad disingenuous of Barker to claim that she rarely thinks of the reader for her work is filled with both inter- and intra-textual nods to the discerning and astute. For example, Black Jack, the local barman Medve is pursuing at the beginning of the novel, is described as 'a modern Heathcliff with his catatonic dial, his catgut breath, his loose, lardy belly (29), undercutting the Byronic hero myth while flattering readers with the literary jibe. Following La Roux's arrival, Barker frequently puns on his name as Medve comments to her sister Patch that 'the man is saucy' (36). Later she describes him as 'La Roux (the sauce)' when he is discovered masturbating in the cupboard to the 'old, well-worn, black and white' photograph of a dog. The dog motif is picked up again later when a sleep-walking La Roux monologises: 'You never liked the dog, did you, Gavin? Not after you found it licking me. But there really was nothing wrong with it. It was simply a matter of two lost souls coming together' (106). The careful reader will discern this clue and make the link between La Roux's sexual experimentation with dogs and the fact that Medve and all her siblings (bar Patch) are named after James Thurber's fictional menagerie of dogs. Of course, La Roux's connection to Medve is also about 'two lost souls coming together', although their climax is ever-deferred, frozen in time in the frame story at the close of the novel (191). This ability of Barker's to produce an obsessively self-referential narrative that is simultaneously a place of imaginative freedom and play is akin to Big's hobby of crocheting (6): the weave may seem loose, but the inherent skill is worn lightly.

La Roux operates as an intratextual articulation of Barker's broader textual project: he is in many ways 'impossible' and as the uninvited guest enacts Boxall's definition of the novel: he 'live[s] in the world without being of it' (91). For Medve, La Roux is the archetypal foreigner and 'total stranger' (25) seeking welcome. His intrusion into Medve's summer triggers in her a crisis of hospitality: she is tempted to expose and share her private spaces, yet equally is disgusted by the prospect of doing so. This quandary is compounded by the fact that Medve's family are already performing a truncated and dysfunctional version of familial domesticity: their personal spaces are ripe for recalibration. The family's grumbling yet generous hosting of him is analogous to the hazards Jacques Derrida identifies as attached to unconditional hospitality: 'You have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything or killing everyone. That is the risk of pure hospitality' (1998: 71). La Roux personifies this risk by actively – and *provocatively* – refusing his role as guest from the outset, seemingly making every effort to out-weird the family as he, for example, wanders around in a balaclava (30) and nonchalantly asks for a ringworm pattern to be cut into his hair (97). Derrida has also argued that 'if there is hospitality, the impossible must be done' (2000: 14): one cannot host anyone without invoking a power dynamic that belies any injunction for the guest to make themselves at home. In John Caputo's words, the altruism that conventionally attaches to the role of the host is specious, underpinned by a desire to remain in a position of control: 'how can I graciously welcome the other while still retaining my sovereignty, my mastery of the house?' (1997: 111).

One element of La Roux's 'sauciness' is his recognition of this Derridean imbalance and, specifically in relation to Medve, his repeated and deliberate trashing of the traditional binary. La Roux's appearance and role parallel that of Vincent in Barker's earlier novel *Reversed Forecast* (1994) whose enforced presence in Ruby's life and his need to be 'hosted'

catalyse a very similar process of self-development and mutual understanding in both characters. However, despite the confusion and mayhem he brings, La Roux, as his name trumpets, is also the base and missing element that allows the family sauce to thicken and thrive. It is his very strange[r]ness, his alterity in the dysfunctional yet routinised family dynamic, that moves them slowly forward. Mireille Rosello concludes her detailed analysis of postcolonial hospitality by positing that ‘the very precondition of hospitality may require that, in some ways, both the host and the guest accept, in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other’ (2001: 176). This is certainly the case in Barker’s novel. La Roux’s vulnerability and ultimate dependence upon the family’s gift of hospitality are laid bare by his quietly whispering to Medve: ‘I have nowhere else to go’ (176) as the returning Christabel raises the possibility of his departure. For the hosts, the hiatus of the summer is broken by his sudden departure and they are forced to confront the loss, love and loyalty they have been denying as they process twelve-year-old Patch’s pregnancy (182) and Mo’s likely affair with her colleague (87).

La Roux’s arrest as an illegal immigrant constitutes the denouement of the novel and the ethical pivot upon which it turns; in Medve it triggers a spontaneous breakdown: ‘The tears start welling and before I know it I’m bawling like a baby [...] I know I’ll never see the skinny, self-centred, stupid, impolitic mother-fucker again’ (182). In conversation with Alex Clark Barker has asserted that ‘struggle and suffering are some of the most beautiful things’ (Clark, 2017) and, despite what Victor Sage refers to as Medve’s ‘fully dialogic, fully obscene, fully billingsgate’ (95) voice, this earlier novel climaxes in genuine emotional distress. In the same interview in the *Times Literary Supplement* in which she comments on the novel as a form able to contain and evoke ‘the Pair of Opposites paradox’, Barker also speaks of how she ‘believe[s] in redemption’ and that this ‘underscores everything I think and feel’ (Anonymous, 2017). In *Five Miles from Outer Hope* redemption is delivered in the

narrative frame as Medve's mourning for the loss of La Roux is both acknowledged and redressed when she finally allows herself to be penetrated by his needles during the acupuncture session (102). This act of acceptance brings her the closure needed to contemplate a possible future with her lost nemesis and soulmate: the acceptance is, necessarily, of the paradox. The reader is alerted to La Roux's connection to Medve as soon as he meets her when he comments upon her 'handsome chin' (26), something that she has earlier flagged to the reader as her best feature (12). La Roux reads her in a way that no one else has, and her frustration and fury with him are due to the knowledge of herself that he – a random stranger – brings to her door. It is telling that Medve's nightly dreams of US prisoner and celebrity Jack Henry Abbott cease as soon as she admits her feelings for La Roux: fantasy is replaced by potential, albeit a potential that has been wrenched away.

La Roux's wider role as an agent of connectivity is signposted early on in the novel when Black Jack likens him to a starling. At this stage Medve is furious that La Roux has intruded again into her space and bitchily describes a starling (unknown to the native South African) as 'a greasy little brown bird. Very noisy' (119). This early association of La Roux with the intrusive, scruffy bird identifies him unequivocally as the most impossible (literally, and in the Derridean sense) 'guest' par excellence. But 'greasy', 'noisy' birds flock together to create a wonder that exceeds the sum of their many parts, and it is the astounding appearance of a starling murmuration that comes to serve as the moral epicentre of the novel:

They've *come*. In their thousands. Like a hurricane. But silent, and ghostly. [...] They arrive like a plague of feathers. Like a glossy, black whirlwind. A tornado of starlings, darting and spinning and turning and spiralling. Making shapes in the sky. Flying in formation. But madly. And randomly.

A million birds. One huge, great organism. One cloud. Then they divide. And join up again. (178)



The murmuration makes an appearance between Christabel's suggestion that La Roux might leave and Patch's phoning of the immigration authorities, and it is poignantly underpinned by the fact that La Roux has already informed Medve that he has no other refuge; there is nowhere else for him to go. The fundamentally redemptive qualities of Barker's work are crystallised in this evocation of the starlings. La Roux's response is one of wonder and loss: 'His face is turned to the heavens, his mouth open. He is *crying*' (178), prefiguring Medve's tears at his leaving and once again demonstrating the seriousness that underpins Barker's comedic tone. Barker's deployment of the murmuration coalesces the contested and contesting spaces of the novel while demonstrating 'the Pair of Opposites paradox' in process. By 'flying in formation. But madly' the parliament of birds represents an instance of spatial synthesis where, momentarily, conformity and resistance coexist in perfect harmony. Although Barker employs the image of the murmuration in a manner reminiscent of modernist epiphanies, the disjunction between 'formation' and 'madly' makes the moment more heterogeneously complex than the purely epiphanic. There is an acceptance here of categorical difference and otherness amongst the uplift of the birds' harmonised flight.

The promise of synthesis, connectivity and community resonates through Barker's novel as a counterbalance to chaos and seemingly irreconcilable difference. It is also a distillation of what Clark regards as a recurring concern in Barker's work 'of transcendence, of the relationship of the sharply felt self to an amorphous whole, the phenomena of faith, martyrdom, suffering' (2017). That Barker can hold these themes in such careful tension using Medve's explosive, disorderly language to tell a farcical, rollicking ride of a tale is testament to her dexterity as a novelist. Boxall has argued that the novel's value as a form resides in its ability 'to work at the disappearing threshold between the word that exists and that which does not, between the world that we already know and understand and that which we have not yet encountered' (13). This definition very aptly captures Barker's creative

impetus while also underpinning her contention that novels relish the already-quoted paradox that ‘things can both live and die at the same time’. This returns us to the proposition that the challenge to hegemonically intransigent discursive and phenomenological structures is being rehearsed uniquely in fictional spaces. Barker’s embrace and practice of deliberately discombobulating ‘bumpiness’ is far more disruptive than the word implies. Barker’s novels destabilise conventional demarcations of time, place, body and text, challenging the normative in order to voice and celebrate the marginalised, the ignored and the dispossessed. The charm of *Five Miles from Outer Hope* is extensive, but it is its message of the need for a roux, a mixture, that resonates long after Medve and La Roux have been left standing on the platform at the edge of the text.

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